

Phenomenology of perception in Saramago's *Blindness*

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Abstract

Novels of José Saramago are known for postmodernese but his novel, *Blindness*, can be analyzed better using phenomenological study. In Saramago's *Blindness* a sudden blindness becomes an epidemic among the inhabitants of a large, unnamed city. The characters transform the world around them. The work presents the relevance of the senses in the process of relationship and understanding of the world. In this context, the concept of the body of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty as seen in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (2005), *The Visible and the Invisible* (2007) and *The Eye and the Spirit* (2004) presents itself as a relevant subject to be considered in the analysis of *Blindness*. The philosopher deals with the study of essences and says the essence is the perception (Merleau-Ponty 2006). Just as Merleau-Ponty proposes reflections on the essence of being human, in *Blindness*, with the loss of vision of the characters, there are detailed processes perceptive of the individual to the world and the other. Overlapping of human instincts at the expense of their illusory consciousness is also there. Before the blindness, which defies all scientific knowledge, the characters seemed to live in an automatic world. In Merleau-Ponty's view, it is the body that perceives and not the awareness. Similarly in *Blindness*, the blindness forces the characters to change their behaviour and understanding of the world.

Key words: Phenomenology, perception, other, tact, gradients, anosognosia.

In *Blindness*, people suddenly become blind. From the blindness, perceptions already realized by sight are transferred to other sensory gradients (hearing, smell, tact, and taste). These other senses are sharpened to compensate for the lack of vision. Now the world becomes not what is seen (visible) but only what is heard, smelt and touched and enjoyed (the invisible). There is the realizing of the process of perception in *Blindness*. In *Blindness* the characters realize the body. Only through perception they establish relationship with others. When trying to grope the girl with dark glasses in quarantine, the car thief suffers an injury in the leg in response from the girl. Owing to lack of medicine and treatment, the wound festers.

The phenomenon described fits the case of anosognosia discussed by Merleau-Ponty (2006). This is when the patient ignores a member of his body to be paralyzed, no longer feeling it. The psychological explanation is that the phenomenon occurs by a refusal of disability. It is through the body that the individual constitutes such training. The concept of esthesis breaks this dichotomy to seek a unity of body and soul. Here both are interdependent and it is this relationship that makes existence. Based on this view, characters in Saramago's *Blindness* seek to understand how those individuals are from the relationship with space and with the other guys through the body. The space is configured as a large urban centre, with its own rules, which force those characters to follow them for the sake of survival.

A significant relationship between the body and the perception, between the blind people's ways of understanding and being are in the world of the blind in *Blindness*. To understand the aspects concerning the perception of these characters, it is essential to discuss how it manifests itself in the narrative—the sensations through

every sense and its significant effects. To these senses—sight, hearing, smell, tact and taste—Borges Filho (2007; 2009) has named sensory gradients. To represent this gradual relationship, Borges (Filho 2007, 70) draws up the following schedule: Vision; Hearing; Smell; Tact; Taste. Based on this scheme, they are checked at two extremes, having vision as the farthest sense and taste as the nearest meaning in relationship of the characters with the Other and with space. At first *Blindness* is revealed from a world with strong visual needs. It can live with the sensory gradient, since the space is described in the work as a large urban centre, with many winding streets and buildings. In this city, without sight, people will not survive. In addition to these features, the space is filled with exploration imagery through shop windows, posters, boards, billboards, the traffic lights, among other features that span all environments; the city is mostly focused on the commercial exploitation. From then onwards, the characters need to survive only with hearing, smell, tact and taste. And it is established that they live in the world mainly by visual perception. Interestingly, the vision of the remote receiver establishes a ratio greater in distance with the outside world. This may indicate that the characters in *Blindness* keep a distant relationship with other subject and space and the transfer of the vision to other receptors. Without vision, the receiver assumes a significant hearing importance in order to compensate the lack of sense of the perceptual process. As Saramago says, “The voice is the sight of the person who cannot see” (BL 112).

It is interesting to note that hearing takes place from the perception of author-narrator and, other times, the voice of the characters themselves takes place as stated by the doctor: “The voice is the sight of the person who cannot see” (BL 112). The noise also appears to demonstrate the authoritarian, domineering army. We see the authoritarian attitude in the narrative when the doctor’s wife, along with her husband,

comes to the quarantine. Guided by a rail which is divided into two paths, they enter the building. Now the sergeant shouts: “Keep to the right” (BL 38). Thereafter, the dominant noise is strongly influenced by the loudspeaker through which the army issues strict orders.

Therefore, silence and noise make up meanings and provide a strong psychological climax to the plot. Silence, from the beginning of the narrative, is present in the absence of answers about the origin of the white blindness. Then it is reflected from the domination and abandonment within the quarantine. The noise first appears by the order of army soldiers and later by the shouts and fights among the blind themselves. At the end of the narrative, the connotations of the silence and noise seem to reverse. They transmit positive character. The silence represents tranquility in the scene where the blind group is in the house of the doctor where they feel safe and comfortable. The sounds that stand out in this environment are the laughter of women, sound of bathing and the sound of rain suggesting peace: “the laughter, the noise of the rain and the beating of the water, he breathed the smell of the soap” (BL 267).

Another aspect to be considered with regard to the auditory receptor is that without vision the characters would be aiming at developing a more acute hearing. For example, bats, porpoises and whales are guided by what Schiffman (2005) calls location by eco. In *Blindness*, Saramago has expressed this view by stating that “... a blind with blind training is something else” (BL 140) in reference to a born blind (the blind accountant), together with the blind hoodlums in quarantine. This is also revealed in the scene where the new blind are brought to the quarantine and when they enter, the doctor’s wife describes them to her husband in a low voice in order to identify them. In due course, the hearing of blind would be accentuated.

The next immediate receiver is tact: “The hands are the eyes of the blind” (*BL* 301). The tactile experience is only possible when it is very close to something perceived. Thus, the touch makes the sightless individual to strengthen their relationship with other people, objects or their space. So, they can get a sense about them. Tact covers the whole body; it is all sensation that gives the skin in general. Schiffman explains this “as a sensory organ the skin contains inside endings specialized nerve that allow you to be stimulated in various ways, to mediate different sensations” (Schiffman 301). In *Blindness*, the touch mode receiver is seen in the scene when the first blind man reaches his apartment and tries to open the door:

He took from his pocket a small bunch of keys, felt them one by one along the serrated edge, and said, It must be this one, and feeling for the keyhole with the fingertips of his left hand, he tried to open the door (*BL* 6-7).

When the blind man had vision, the sensory gradient was not necessary. In these passages, it is clear the adaptation to use more finely sensory gradient is important and difficult. However, the tact consists of a sense quite skilled in humans and not so in animals as highlighted by Borges Filho (2007): “. . . in the animal kingdom, human hands are unsurmountable; they combine strength and precision in an unmatched way” (Filho 93). In this perspective, the blind start to use this strong perceptual feature as they had never done until that moment. They perceive their world and the other world by touch as the doctor’s wife says,

And what’s this about the images having their eyes covered, It’s true,
And how do you know when you are blind, You would know too if

you did what I did, go and touch them with your hands, the hands are the eyes of the blind (*BL* 301).

An interesting aspect of this scene is that for the first time, throughout the narrative, the doctor's wife as well as the author-narrator are 'blind' and describe the visual perceptions of that environment because it is a place without lighting. Both the doctor's wife and author-narrator as character take the blind perspective. "The noise of the little match-sticks when we shake the box", (*BL* 219), "the smell of detergent (*BL* 219), "this is a smell not to be confused with any other" (*BL* 219) and "But first, the doctor's wife sits on the ground, opens a packet of chorizo sausage, another with slices of black bread, a bottle of water, and without remorse, starts eating" (*BL* 220). These passages serve as another example of the shuttle between the vision and blindness of the author-narrator. By observing the tactile sense of warmth, it is noted that it arises in the asylum fire, caused by a woman who triggers her lighter, so that this inhuman situation is ceased. The building is already burning from one end to the other: "the blind feel in the face living waves the heat of fire" (*BL* 209). After the fire, there is the release of the blind from the quarantine. The blind run towards places of supposed freedom in the streets. The author-narrator narrates,

They do not know where to go, the fact is that there is no comparison between living in a rational labyrinth, which is, by definition, a mental asylum and venturing forth, without a guiding hand or a dog-leash, into the demented labyrinth of the city (*BL* 206).

In *Blindness*, sensory touch gradient is the instrument in recognition of people, objects and spatial location, which makes the relations closer. Tact, which is in a negative sense, serves more to convey the desperation of the characters, especially the

blind hoodlums, who use it to violate women. In *Blindness*, the perceptive relations of the characters remain more at intermediate level (hearing, tact and smell) throughout the narrative. There are some cases of taste which also denote a certain distant relationship of the characters. All these scenes are related to couples. Therefore, there should be a greater relationship of intimacy or approach in the plot, which does not happen. But there are negative moments of abuse and assault, as the scenes of sex between the hoodlums and the blind women, in which the doctor's wife is forced to perform oral sex.

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Saramago's *Baltasar and Blimunda* as a historiographic metafiction

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Abstract

Postmodern literature has many characteristics like intertextuality, pastiche, maximalism, irony, hyperreality, paranoia, fragmentation and historiographic

metafiction. Metafiction makes awareness in the readers that it is fiction. In a metafiction, there is a story within story or there are obvious references to the narrative. But in a historiographic metafiction, history is fictionalized and fiction is historicized and it also functions as a metafiction. In *Baltasar and Blimunda*, Saramago uses the history of King Dom João V and fictionalizes it by mixing the romance of imaginary characters like Baltasar and Blimunda.

Key words: Historiographic metafiction, historicize, fictionalize, enunciator, eponymous.

Introduction

Baltasar and Blimunda is not completely a historical novel but there are elements of history in it. King Dom João V, known as the “Magnanimous”, who ruled Portugal from 1689 to 1750, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão (1685-1724) a Portuguese priest, naturalist and a heretic, also known both as the “Flying Man” and Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757), the Italian who fingered the keyboard of the harpsichord, are all very much in the novel. Besides, Dona Maria Ana Josefa (1683-1754), the Archduchess of Austria, and the Queen of King Dom João and her daughter, Bárbara, to celebrate whose birth Dom João built, during the years 1717 to 1755, the Convent at Mafra, are also there. When a reader comes into contact with these historical characters, this novel, *Baltasar and Blimunda*, impresses him as a historical novel. It will not be easy for the reader to see where the historical part ends and where the fiction begins.

Historical novels, in general, have for their main purpose the reflection on historical data and historical characters. Here the writer has retrieved the past, mixed it with fiction and made the fictional world get closer to reality. Fiction creates and

recreates, sometimes omitting facts, to make the characters convincing. The author creates an alternative reading of the past. The reader may not know history and to him not everything may be believable as the relationship between history and fiction is complicated. Literature built on history gives the reader a sense of having already experienced the present situation. The historical contextualization in the literary narrative makes possible an aesthetic phenomenon. It is common to find texts that unite fiction with reality. Through this way of creating literature is sustained as a system. At the same time it functions as an element of identity constitution and expression of identities, may be regional, national, ethnic, racial, sexual or social identity. The question of the constitution of identity is dealt with by Saramago.

In *Baltasar and Blimunda*, Saramago proposes to count for the construction of a convent in Mafra. Though there are important historical figures such as King Dom, João, Saramago makes Blimunda Sete-Luas or Seven Moons, as one of the protagonists. This woman, an exceptional character, like the doctor's wife of *Blindness*, represents the town in a historical account attributed to the King Dom João. Saramago does not change the identity of the king. But through an ironic treatment, he creates Blimunda an ordinary woman, to be an important woman to get rid of the social conventions and historical records which praise only the kings and the rulers. The events of the eighteenth century are portrayed by the character of Blimunda, who can see what really is in the world. Thus, the reader may understand the church's historical and moral slips and the excesses of the nobility.

When the reader encounters a historical character in a novel, he/she realizes that the identity of the character is often not rational or stable as it is expected through history. So it is with Dona Maria Ana Josefa, always narrated as the queen, fulfilling her role as such. In Saramaguian narrative, she is a normal woman with carnal desires

as her marriage complies but with protocol. This makes the queen fulfill her desires through the night dreams she has with her brother-in-law. She becomes weak when she feels this desire and for this reason she lives to pray. The Queen is ready, waiting and she knows that her husband is on his way. Immediately the narrator says, “Let her wait.” The King and the Queen wear long dress which drags by the ground but only the king’s dress is embroidered and the queen’s dress is half a foot longer so that no one can see big tiptoe of the queen. The King guides the Queen by the hand to the bed, like a gentleman leading his partner on to the dance floor.

The narrator says that all these “marriage obligations” have a purpose to beget the desired son to ensure succession to the throne. The story of *Baltasar and Blimunda* is told emphatically. The names, *Baltasar and Blimunda*, complement each other as if closing a circle: the sun and the moon, the day and night which make up all lives, the clarity and mystery which govern them and which are the components of this novel. A reader may think of Blimunda as a completely fictional character, totally rooted in the fictional world of the narrative. But there are documents that prove the existence, in the reign of D. João V, of a woman very much like Blimunda: the same beautiful, ‘excessive’ eyes, the same powers. Her name, however, was not Blimunda, but Pedegache. The name was changed, but the identities were kept.

The truth of history is systematically called into question through the introduction of judgments and fictional constructs which allow the emergence of the enunciator’s ideology, either directly through the expression of sympathy towards a specific sign, or more subtly, through the opposition, often ironically constructed, to another ideologically connoted sign. Blimunda gathers up Baltasar’s will as he burns to death in the Inquisition fires. Saramago has gathered up ours to accept his new heroes. This novel has been a world-wide success. And the consecration of

Blimunda as the emblematic character in the eponymous opera, certainly testifies to the effectiveness of Saramago's message.

As for Blimunda, she is a warrior and does not fear the challenges imposed by the poor and unjust life that leads her to the side of Baltasar, her husband. The couple, Baltasar and Blimunda, unlike the king and the queen, represents love in a simple way and their love is not for any political or economic power. The young woman meets Baltasar, asks his name and begins to live with him as husband and wife: "What is your name, and the man spontaneously told her, thus acknowledging that this woman had a right to question him, Baltasar Mateus, otherwise known as Sete-Sóis" (BB 44). Baltasar and Blimunda live together and the narrator presents this union as a contrast to that of the king and the queen, in a way to mock the pomp of the nobility. This relationship is not like that of the King who makes programmed "twice weekly" visits to the Queen and of the Queen who thinks of her brother-in-law and lies with the King, praying all the time. In the descriptions of the amorous relations of this couple, the surrender is mutual and the love comes out in an inexplicable way.

The 'marriage' of Baltasar and Blimunda is solemnized by Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão. Once again, Saramago subverts history which talks about the pomp in the marriage of Dom João and D. Maria Ana. The reader is interested in the differentiation that the author presents between the protagonist and the secondary characters. In this sense, Blimunda may be considered the protagonist of the novel, since her character is an autonomous character responsible for the progression of the sequences that lead. This is justified by the fact that "the protagonists will stand out from the other characters appearing in sequences that do not require reimbursement of other characters" (Vieira 241). The other characters do not have as much autonomy in the narrative. The clearest demonstration of a character's autonomy occurs when

Baltasar disappears in the flying machine. Then, Blimunda devotes her days to looking for his great love and her search for Baltasar has persisted for nine years.

D Maria Ana may be a queen but she is a woman and the society will only blame her for not providing an heir to the throne and the sense of guilt of the queen increases. Blimunda has no such guilt and she lives with Baltasar as happily as it is possible. Saramago mocks the monarch's logical but heretical view of his genitals as a site of power by subverting the baroque monumentalist aesthetic.

The king is epitomized by the history the Mafra monastery itself. The poor people are employed to aggrandize God, the King and the institutions the King and the Church command. Saramago deflates monumentalist bombast representing Dom João and other characters in grotesque disproportion to the symbol of their alleged power. The contingencies of the royal and the allegedly divine powers are revealed by demonstrating that authority depends on the harnessed will and strength of an acquiescent or coerced populace. Saramago reworks the grotesque imagery of Swift and other seventeenth and eighteenth-century satirists to serve his own radically different ideology. Besides building the Mafra monastery, this novel is the story of the construction of a wondrous flying machine, the *Passarola*, powered by the levitating energy of captured human wills, found within the body as dense cloud. The *Passarola* project, executed to the design of the priest Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão and by his friends, the one-handed ex-soldier Baltasar Sete-Sóis and the clairvoyant Blimunda Sete-Luas, is conceptualist allegory demonstrating that popular will and physical endeavour, not divine might, are the motors of history. It suggests the progress of morality and technology that follow the deregulation and integration into the civic and economic spheres of life of the human energy which is suppressed, commandeered and perverted by self-aggrandising tyrants.

Conclusion

The novel's narrative binds the contrasting stories of engineering projects through the agency of a group of protagonists including fictionalised historical figures—the King and his consort, and Bartolomeu de Gusmão—and fictional characters such as Baltasar and Blimunda. Saramago's fictional accretions to historical fact fill in gaps in the record. He reinserts the agency and experience of the oppressed and marginalized social constituencies. He opposed the established view of the monastery's construction as a vision of the heroism of the downtrodden labourers. Meanwhile, Saramago also introduces an element of fantasy that, together with the narrative voice's frequent self-interruptions, advertises the gap between this new historical account and a complete and objective truth. The *Passarola* is built through loving collaboration and for the betterment of the human condition. By commandeering human wills, and defying the injunctions against 'heretical' scientific experimentation of the Portuguese Church and its Inquisition, the builders of the *Passarola* achieve a short-lived, but symbolically powerful, riposte to the reactionary hegemony of God and King. In a metafiction, Saramago fictionalizes history and historicizes fiction and thereby makes it a historiographic metafiction.

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